Introduction

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Introduction

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I

On 28 February 2002, in Godhara, a little known railway station of Gujarat, in an unprecedented case of arson nearly fifty-eight passengers on the Sabarmati express lost their lives. Many of those who perished in this dreadful fire were volunteers of a militant Hindu nationalist organization namely Viswa Hindu Parishad (translated as World Hindu Council and popularly called VHP). These volunteers were returning home from a rally in Ayodhya where VHP was trying to construct a Ram temple on the site of a sixteenth century mosque named after Indian's first Mughal emperor Babar.

The temple agitation, periodically orchestrated by Hindu nationalist organizations from 1989 onwards, has unfailingly provoked communal eruptions in the country resulting in large casualties. The February 2002 agitation was no exception to this trend: only this time the stakes were higher. As soon as the news of murderous arson spread, the VHP cashed in on the tragedy by calling for a total strike in Gujarat. The strike escalated into widespread well-orchestrated attacks on Muslim minorities, worsening - in the process - the relationship between India and Pakistan, already tense in the wake of the Kargil war, nuclear tests, and terrorist assaults in New Delhi and Kashmir . Soon Indian media, politicians opposed to Hindu nationalist organizations, and human rights activists alleged that the Bharatya Janata Party, the ruling political party in Gujarat and a sister Hindu nationalist organization of the VHP, had used state power to assist the attacks on Gujarati Muslims. The police played a crucial role by their conspicuous failure to suppress the riots. Many alleged that the police provided assistance to Hindu rioters and refused backing to the army when it was called in to restore normality. Even according to the conservative estimates of the Hindu nationalist state government of Gujarat, nearly 2000 people

lost their lives and over a hundred thousand were rendered homeless. Gujarat became again a crucial example of the state's failure to maintain law and order in India.

The Gujarat incident brought to the fore the crucial significance of the state- society relationship in India where state institutions have staged a strategic retreat in the face of organised violence against minorities and women. This poses a crucial paradox. The Indian state remains an over developed state with an ever-increasing number of paramilitary forces, bureaucrats and sophisticated technocrats. Yet the state has been completely unable to control violence against the most vulnerable segments of the population. How do we explain the inability of Indian state to stem the tide of growing violence, ethnic conflicts and increasing sense of insecurity among its less affluent citizens or ethnic and religious minorities? Apparently the state in India enjoys an unusual degree of political power to suspend civil liberties of the population in order to meet these threats and to provide security to its citizens. Yet it is powerless to do so. This conundrum has placed the Indian state at the centre of political analysis.

II

Historians have devoted considerable attention to the nature of state formation in pre-colonial and colonial India. The state in post-colonial India has also been analyzed in close detail. Pioneering scholars, such as Gunnar Myrdal, formulated the theory of soft state to explain the inability of underdeveloped countries to eradicate poverty, arguing that the soft state is soft on powerful elites but hard on the powerless segments of population. Hamza Alavi put forward the thesis of the over-developed state in South Asia, based upon his reading of the role played by the bureaucracy and army in Pakistan. Alavi argued that the colonial state effected a bourgeoisie revolution in South Asia and created a vast repository of bureaucrats, along with a disproportionately large security apparatus, intended to subordinate rather than maintain any sort of democratic order. Subsequently, the state has been the focus of considerable sociological scrutiny. Marxist scholars and political activists have often sought to explain the class character of the Indian state in terms of the dominant coalitions of social classes that underpin the political practice of state policies. The most sophisticated analysis of the Indian state along these lines could be found in the work of Pranab Bardhan. Bardhan explains the policies of the Indian state

in terms of a dominant coalition of proprietary classes comprising large industrialists, small industrialists, rich peasants and public sector bureaucrats.

Many American trained political scientists have applied the method of interest group analysis to explain the functioning of the Indian state and political economy. Most prominently among them, Rudolph and Rudolph, in their path breaking work on the Indian political economy, have shown how the tensions between the alternate imperatives of command and demand polities impact upon political life. Recently, following Huntingdon's work on the overheated polity arising from competitive political mobilisation, Atul Kohli has sought to explain how fraction ridden Indian elites at different levels of the Indian polity have been engaged in destabilising competitions, which has resulted in the deinstitutionalisation of the political system, incapacitating the state's ability to maintain public order.

These works have expanded our understanding of the functioning of the Indian state. However, a problem lies in the treatment of the Indian state as a single political entity. The varied operations of diverse forms of institutions that characterise the Indian state cannot be comprehended in such monotonal terms. The state encompasses complex layers of political institutions that operate in a variety of ways in different contexts. Social contexts in locality, state and nation, to evoke an older historical work on the subject, need to be identified in order to understand the functioning of the state. Indeed, instead of talking about the Indian state as a monolithic entity, it is preferable to talk about the state as the sum total of myriad forms of political institutions in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the sub-continental kaleidoscope of political institutions and their immediate social environments. At every stage political institutions are implicated in diverse social nexuses that inform and influence their functioning. Any investigation of the Indian state thus needs to be located in terms of its multi-layered structure and its relationship to the wider society within each layer.

This volume aims to explore various aspects of the twentieth century Indian state ranging from the Central Government level down to local level in the states, cities and villages. It considers both political economic frameworks and the ideological and discursive processes that inform and influence them. It contends that the functioning of the Indian state cannot be comprehended

simply by looking at the changes at the political centre, but are fundamentally influenced by developments in the wider civil society. Thus it aims to bring together a number of insightful essays on multiple aspects of the Indian state as a means to understand the interactive processes that constitute it.

The approach adopted in this volume is particularly crucial in the light of recent changes in the wake of globalisation and liberalisation. The twin processes of globalisation and liberalisation have supposedly undermined the economic autonomy of the Indian state, certainly the centralisation of fiscal powers, and have thus strengthened the regionalisation of the polity. At the same time, these processes have strengthened the state control over the population through innovations in information technology and have enabled the security apparatus at different levels to become more powerful. These significant changes in the nature of the functioning of the Indian state can be better understood if we situate the individual institutions of the state within a long term historical context and submit them to serious sociological scrutiny. The institutions considered in this volume include primarily those that attempt to foster social consent through rudimentary forms of democratic accountability, such as the national parliament, state assemblies urban municipal governments, and rural government institutions such as panchayats. Whilst individual chapters throw light on the nature of the operation of different institutions of the state at different levels of hierarchy, the volume collectively intends to analyse and illuminate the changes taking place in the nature and functioning of the Indian state as a whole. By analysing institutions of the Indian state in the context of their interactions with societal relationships at different levels, our approach will address the wider question of state-society relationships rather than simply narrating stories (however entertaining) of high politics.

III

The chapters in this volume range over the political institutions of India from the central to the grass roots level. It begins with institutions that operate at the central level. The first chapter by Jos Mooij addresses the nature, process and institutional contexts of the liberalisation of the Indian economy. Comparing two attempts at the liberalisation of the Indian economy under Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao, Mooij asks: What have been the political factors that made a

transition from planning to the market possible in the 1990s but not in the 1980s? The chapter critically reviews some of the political science literature that deals with the political processes and institutions in the 1980s and the 1990s that made reform difficult or feasible. It analyses the various contributions to this debate and discusses the work of authors such as Kohli, Varshney, Bardhan, P. Patnaik and others. Through the lens of economic policy changes, the chapter thereby contributes to our rethinking of Indian political processes and institutions. A particular emphasis is placed on the variety of pressures imposing upon the government and the contrast between state-centred, contingent, societal, and external pressures. It is suggested that it was perhaps the relative decline of the Congress party and the threat from political extremists that may have directed attention elsewhere and helped to make reform possible. Societal, fiscal and external pressures also played an important role in undermining the centralised Indian state. This weakness of the federal state has somewhat contrarily permitted both populist and elite pressures to bear heavily upon policy-making: hence the continuation of liberalising reform since the BJP came to power, despite the party's overt commitment to a policy of swadeshi and the re-imposition of restrictions on foreign access to the Indian market. Continuing economic reform has been made further practicable by changes within the governing coalition, which has become more diverse, fluid and fragmented, as compared with the 1980s. A final influence has been changing ideas about the role of the state. The growth of the black economy and the broken promises and failures of the 'Congress era' up until 1996 caused many people to realise that the state simply cannot any longer (if ever could) fully control and direct the progress of the Indian economy. It is for this reason that questions of wealth redistribution are increasingly by-passed in favour of policies intending to increase access to education and the participation of the low castes and under-privileged in the business of government itself. Meanwhile, the elites look increasingly to private enterprise and opportunities overseas rather than the manipulation of government patronage as a means to profit. Curiously however, most explanations of the reform process - according to Mooji - remain state-centred, despite the evidence that many of its motivations lie elsewhere. One might suggest that this could be perhaps be because many economists and academics have themselves a vested interest in the state-centred approach.

In the second chapter Sanjay Ruperalia focuses on the institutional parameters of regime formation as defined in the constitution and its impact on the political strategies of governing

parties. Ruperalia particularly explores the prospects and limits of the practice of secularism in contemporary India through an analysis of the impact of, and recent arguments over, the institutional design of its democratic regime. One of the most striking developments of Indian politics in the last decade was the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of parliament). The BJP espouses a politics of Hindutva (Hindu cultural nationalism), which many critics argue threatens to undermine the secular, plural fabric of the nation through efforts to create a politics of religious majoritarianism. However, despite its relative electoral success, the BJP was able to form a coalition Union government only after striking political bargains with other regional parties. These coalition partners forced the BJP to abandon the pursuit of its more controversial programs, in exchange for their varying degrees of support, in the formal political arena. Thus to some extent the latter was forced to dilute its agenda of Hindutva. Despite the B.J.P.s relegation to the position of second largest party again in the Lok Sabha in the general election of 2004, their Hindutva agenda nonetheless remains a potent threat, given the tensions between pragmatists and ideologues within the party and its associated organisations. Proponents of Hindutva have sought to fulfil their aims using a variety of extreme measures either 'on the streets' in order to change the dense texture of everyday life, or through unilateral interventions in the realm of elite politics which altered the terms of political debate in their favour. Indeed, their desire to transform the official secular doctrine of the Indian State within the formal political arena presently inspires their demands for a review of the basic features of the Constitution. The chapter argues that to grasp partly the ways in which this scenario evolves requires one to examine the larger institutional design of the Indian polity. Three features matter in particular: a plurality-rule (first-past-the-post) electoral regime, a strong cabinet government in a parliamentary regime and a federal party system with several constitutional safeguards. Such features comprise necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for Indian secularism to survive. Ultimately, though, the prospects and quality of a secular politics requires its reiterative practice within a wider and deeper form of democratic politics.

From the central level institutions, we move on to a consideration of the institutions that operate at state level and explore the crucial societal relationships that underpin them. The third chapter thus focuses on the dynamics of personal rivalry in the Janata Dal Party in Karnataka state in the

last fifteen years. Building on field research undertaken in recent years, Pamela Price discusses the conflict between Ramakrishna Hegde and Deve Gowda and the way this conflict resulted in a split in the party, leading to the formation of Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti Party. The Lok Shakti is cited as an example of a trend in Indian politics for political parties at provincial level to be formed around the charisma of single persons. Further personality and political conflict in the Janata Dal led last year to the formation of the Janata Dal (U) and the Janata Dal (S). Overall, the chapter aims to describe the politics of charisma, and the manner in which it has assumed an increasingly important role in the struggle for political power. A tentative explanation of the phenomenon is offered, suggesting the politics of personality to be a consequence of globalisation, and the undermining of traditional loyalties to class, caste, faction and community.

In the fourth chapter in this volume, Veena Naregal looks at the institutions of the media and their connections with the politics of marketability of the media primarily at a regional level. The past few years have seen issues of representation and ideology being displaced as central aspects of media debates. Instead, the right to control distribution territories, has emerged as an increasingly important question, first, in the film and popular music industries, and now, in far more serious ways, in the cable and satellite television industries. These shifts towards the depoliticisation of media correspond with the penetration of the media markets by indigenous, and western transnational corporate organisations. With networks of political patronage and control increasingly tied up with large potential revenues in the media distribution networks, these developments highlight the desire to assert direct control over the public sphere. Nevertheless, despite its rhetoric of withdrawal, these changes have come about through changes and manipulation of media law by the state. This has led to a situation where the increasing ideological volatility in the public sphere - signified by attacks on cultural difference - have gone hand in hand with the expansion of the media sector and its privatisation since the early 1990s. This chapter examines these emerging trends with respect to Mumbai, focusing on the consolidation in the cable and satellite television industries which demonstrates the growing integration between corporate interests, local political and media networks. The resulting data is used to interrogate recent shifts and contestations over media policy.

The fifth chapter, by Bhavana Padiyath, moves from provincial politics to the study of urban

political institutions, focusing on the largest metropolis of India, namely Mumbai. It examines the institutional impact and political outcomes of the post-independence planning enterprise and concludes that Mumbai is a city that is basically frozen because of its land laws, development control rules and zoning regulations. 1991 census figures reveal that while the population of Greater Mumbai (a 428 square kilometre area) grew by 8 per cent over the previous decade to touch 9.9 million. The count for the Mumbai Metropolitan Region as a whole rose to 12.5 million, indicating the pressures on land and scarcity of housing that have put real estate prices in the city beyond the reach of most citizens. The socio-economic and political compulsions that have led to the inelasticity of Mumbai's land 'market are examined in this chapter, alongside the various projects that benchmark the urban planning process in the city. A primary endeavour of this chapter is to demonstrate the powerlessness of the purported beneficiaries of urban planning schemes and to explain how the governing elite and other political actors influenced the various agendas at work and profited from this asymmetrical structuring of social space in the city. The uneven institutional impacts of these projects on various classes and communities, and their political responses are outlined, along with the manner in which they influence and actuate each other. Included in the study is a review of the formal political, legal and administrative entities in operation within the democratic regime, like the body of legislation, parties, and the bureaucratic mechanisms that set the parameters of policy and ensure its implementation. The chapter argues that closer attention needs also to be paid to other regularised channels of interaction and exchange which, although not formally codified, attempt to bridge the expanse between the official channels of 'state' and the dense network of systems within 'civil society' that seek to negotiate their mutual terms of interaction with the powers that be. The chapter reviews the role of these formal and informal institutional settings in engendering and accentuating the segmentation pervading several sectors of the city's socio-economic landscape - land, housing, transportation, environment, spheres of production, information and social stratification. An attempt is finally made to examine how popular initiatives have sought to counter this sealing of democratic options and spaces through the erection of new institutional platforms from a variety of vantage points.

In chapter six, in a detailed discussion of the urban politics and environmental infrastructure, Bharat Dahiya deals with the nature of urban politics of waste disposal in the city of Chennai.

Combining historical investigation with an urban policy framework, Dahiya demonstrates the crucial need for the democratic accountability of civic administration to ordinary citizens. Based on empirical research in the Chennai city, he carefully explains the emergence of autonomous civil society in Chennai city through the activities of grass roots organisations which work towards improving urban living conditions. These civil society activities have tended to reenergise ordinary citizens into action. The very success of such activities has threatened the political turf of politicians who have often refused co-operation with civil society organizations. As a result, opportunities to improve governance and living conditions in urban areas are lost. Yet such activities often could not over come the social fault lines between rich and poor, citizen's initiatives being more often concentrated in the prosperous municipal districts than in the poorer areas of the city, causing environmental social divisions based on wealth. Dahiya's paper highlights the salience of maintaining the urban environmental infrastructure in Indian cities and the problems associated with the political institutions of the state and emerging civil society in general when it comes to addressing such issues. He concludes by arguing for a greater autonomy of civil society action combined with accountable state administration at local level.

From the larger urban settings of Mumbai and Chennai the volume moves on to consider the small rural market town of Bolpur. This chapter investigates the evolution of town polity in terms of the establishment of the political institutions related to the developmental state from the opening years of the twentieth century. With the rise of the developmental state these small towns witnessed the emergence of a grid of state controlled public institutions, ranging from electric power generating houses and nationally owned banks through to schools and hospitals. These institutions define the parameters of a small town polity. The chapter argues that the social structure of such rural town polities evolves in relation to a variety of political institutions. Political, social and economic access to such institutions affects the life chances of the rural-town population and informs the social stratification process. Thus class structure in these rural towns is determined not by production processes, but by the consumption of educational and health services as well as the ability to garner resources from state-run institutions. The advent of democracy and the emergence of elected social institutions, such as municipal government, has created a class of political entrepreneurs who negotiate between and seek to access these

institutions in order to utilise their resources. Yet the formalised centralised bureaucratic structure of such institutions play little meaningful role in economic redistribution. As a consequence, political alignments remain fluid and often depend upon a populist anti-institutional overtone. This explains the success of populist politicians such as Mamata Banerjee's appeal to the urban masses over the more highly institutionalised corporatist structure of the Communist Parties.

Chapters in the final section of this volume analyse the rural political institutions in India and how these institutions create a political framework of participation, language of mobilisation, and a wider discourse of political rights. The eighth chapter, by Sumi Madhok, seeks to problematic the right of political office and political participation in the lives of rural, poor and illiterate women. It examines in particular the conflict between public individualism which informs the functioning of 'public institutions' and the social doctrines sanctioning private freedoms which make political participation possible. The chapter begins by examining the tension between the public and private view of the person as seen in the encounter of rural women with political rights in India. These engagements with political rights take on two different forms. These forms correspond with the two different understandings of the self that come into being as a result of these engagements. The first understanding of the self is primarily in terms of a right bearing agent, the second assumes the form of an embedded relational self. More often than not these forms intersect. The engagements with political rights and the reformulation of meanings that accompanies these are, it is argued, indicative of their particular capacities, and more specifically, of their moral autonomy. Finally it is argued that the articulation of and commitment to political rights, which is not always evident in their action, compels us to look for ways in which we can capture conceptually their capacities and the effects ensuing from the particular skills of individuals — skills referred to as 'political literacy'. In order to illustrate the argument, the chapter examines the moral encounter with the idea and language of 'rights' of a group of rural women known as the *sathins* involved in a state sponsored development program for women in the North Western Indian State of Rajasthan. The *sathins* are largely illiterate or semi literate and belong largely to the lowest castes. The fieldwork was conducted in the districts of Jaipur and Ajmer over a period of eight months, between September 1998 and April 1999.

Madhok concludes that the negotiations of the *sathins* with political rights take the form of an interpretative exercise that results in new meanings both moral and linguistic. Some of these meanings are born out of a desire by women to weave some of their existing moral values together with new values with which they have come into contact and have acquired. It is argued that these linguistic meanings are therefore essentially efforts, both practical and intellectual, to increase the comprehensibility of rights-based ideas within an existing moral framework, articulating thereby the encounter between 'modernity' and 'tradition'.

From these discussions of the political rights of the women in rural India the ninth chapter moves to the historical and political processes of the construction of panchayati raj and the wider processes involved in the construction of the notion of the Indian village as the quintessential representative of Indian civilization. The discourse on panchayati reform thus dwells on the nature of the rural empowerment and the discourse of the rural social reconstruction. The chapters begins with the premise that the Indian village community is firmly embedded in the orientalist imagining of India. The composition of these village committees and the powers they are believed to have exercised has varied enormously over time and from province to province. Gandhi was a firm believer but hardly an unequivocal champion of village self-government. Village communities must not exist as disconnected units, he argued, but held together by a system of co-operation and integration. Gandhi recommended a massive decentralisation of government after independence, the higher centres of governmental power being reduced and the organ of administration becoming the panchayat, organised into village, town, district, provincial and all-India units of government. However, Gandhi, C.R. Das and others in the I.N.C. were not the only advocates of panchayats. As the nationalist struggle progressed, Gandhi became more ambitious for the idea of village self-government, but so too did the British, who made panchayats and village co-operatives the foundation of their reformed constitution.

Post independence, the Gandhian ideal was abandoned, but a limited programme of panchayati raj was instituted in several states. The problem with these panchayats is that they were set up largely for developmental reasons, and although panchayats were constituted at village level (including always a certain number of women and SC/STs), most often the executive powers lay at block level, where a block Samiti was constituted by delegates from a number of villages.

There was thus very little continuity with the primarily judicial panchayats of the 1920's, let alone Thomas Metcalfe's or even Gandhi's idea of little village republics. Panchayats were constituted in many villages, but they had few responsibilities beyond village drainage, street lighting, sanitation and the arbitration of petty disputes. The dispersal of development thus remained largely in the hands of officials.

During Rajiv Gandhi's government of the mid 1980s, a committee - chaired by H.M. Singhvi - proposed the re-organisation of panchayati raj institutions and the setting up of effective village level committees. Soon after, the first of several Constitutional Amendments was proposed making it legally binding upon all states to establish a three-tier system of panchayats at the village, intermediate and district level, each of them to be appointed by direct election. Following the passage of this bill into law as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993, the States introduced in some cases radical measures which delegated significant powers and responsibilities onto panchayats. In 1996 the Lok Sabha then passed a bill extending the proposed panchayati system into Scheduled (i.e. adivasi) areas. This bill went to so far as to oblige state governments to devolve all responsibility for planning and development onto the panchayats - a radical restructuring of the juridical position of the panchayats, which state level administrations are now only beginning to come to terms with. The question remains to be answered whether this new enthusiasm for panchayati rule is likely to fare any better than those that have gone before, and whether it is a long cherished dream finally come true, or merely the latest twist in a struggle for power and control over government expenditure between central and state governments and village elites. This chapter surveys the origins of the idea of panchayati raj, the present-day issues, and point tentatively towards a conclusion and prediction of future developments.

The final chapter in the volume focuses more precisely, by means of a case study, on one aspect of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. This amendment, apart from making elections to the panchayati raj institutions (PRI) mandatory, introduced a reservation of no less than 33% of seats and positions for women. Evelin Hust begins by tracing traces the background of this revolutionary step, from which it becomes clear that many advocates expected that the reservation for women would lead to women's empowerment. The paper then sets out to explore

whether this is really taking place, and begins by questioning the very meaning of empowerment itself. Thus, the reservation for women might ensure that a substantive number of women manage to get into formal positions of power. Whether these women can really exercise power and become empowered in a more general sense though needs to be empirically tested. By presenting results from fieldwork conducted in the eastern State of Orissa, Evelin Hust attempts to does do this. The field research (a quantitative survey in 1998/99 and a qualitative one in 1999/2000) was conducted in two blocks that differ in their socio-political history and in the present economic position and women's status. Female and male incumbents of the PRI are the focus of analysis, so the results are analysed by gender as well as by region.

Generally speaking women were found to be younger, less educated and poorer than their male colleagues and to participate less in the decision-making process. They also spent less time on their work for the panchayat than the male politicians, although those in the 'developed' block spent rather more time than those in the less developed block. Women hardly took any part in public meetings, and work to be done outside the confines of the panchayat office was often taken care of by male family members. Very few women decided themselves to participate in elections, but there is a perceptible gap between the regions: those in the 'developed' block being more autonomous. Around 60% of the women did not face a contest, but more than 35% of the men also faced no rival. It appears therefore that unanimous decisions are cherished by traditional village communities, and are not necessarily linked to gender.

Perhaps depressingly, the reasons given by village communities for the (s)election of a specific woman were simply her education and willingness, or that of her husband. Interestingly though, quite a number of *gaanjhias* (women married in the village of origin) were elected, for they are less confined in their social intercourse with men. Generally speaking, male villagers were not very happy with the reservation system. As to empowerment: most elected women perceived a gain in knowledge, interest in politics, and an enhanced status in the family and village community. And more women than men, especially in the 'developed' block, spoke about doing something specifically for women and children. This offers some hope that a more gender-balanced rural development might take place in the future. 70% of elected women wished to remain in the institutions, or even aspired for higher positions, especially those in the more

forward block. This is a possible indicator of their confidence and belief in their abilities.

Generally speaking, it appears that some empowerment has taken place for the elected women. The impact on the women remaining outside the institutions appears though to be feebler. In the backward block it seems that the elected women became removed from the female constituency. However, most women were still happy that other women were elected and perceived that they now had access to their elected representatives, which was not the case before. These results indicate that undeniably a process of empowerment has been started by the reforms in local self government in rural India, at least in the case of Orissa, but that progress has been rather more successful in the better-placed regions. This points to the all-pervasive effects of inequality in Indian society and the need for additional measures. This in turn depends on a continuing political will to put these reforms into practice. However, positive changes do seem to have occurred in both of the regions of Orissa studied, and the sheer quantitative impact of one third of female representatives being created should not be underrated. In this respect gains from reservation are already perceptible, but it will be a long lasting process, and additional strategies have to be adopted if there is a greater impact on women's life in general. Furthermore, whether other states have been, or will be, as efficacious as Orissa in extending democracy at a local level remains an open question.

IV

The examples and studies in this volume interpret the term political institution in an eclectic fashion. This invariably results from looking at diverse forms of institutions associated with the developmental state in India and locating their functioning in relation to society. We hope thereby to suggest some of the ways in which the institutional designs of the Indian state inform and influence social texture and in turn are shaped by the social texture that surround them. The volume deliberately refrains form looking at institutions simply in terms of high politics, but attempts to explain the dynamism of Indian state as a whole by examining it at different levels and in different contexts. In recent years, a regular refrain in both scholarly circles and popular journalistic media has been to highlight the supposed ‘de-institutionalisation’ of the Indian polity. This volume indicates that this term is perhaps less valid than might be supposed. Within

a thriving democracy, with a rapidly growing economy, Indian political institutions are undergoing a process of reactivation. It is indeed, true that the institutional design of the state at its apex demands serious reform. The first-past-the-post electoral system and over-centralisation has enabled a small number of political elites to exercise enormous power over a country of one billion people with diverse language religion and cultural traditions. In many ways these institutional designs, based upon the Indian constitution, have possibly restrained extreme political formations - such as the RSS and their political representatives - from exercising control over the |Indian political system. But on the other hand, the first-past-the-post system has enabled parties to exercise much wider power than their regionally concentrated, rather thin layer of mass support might otherwise permit.

Another visible political de-institutionalisation that has mesmerised observers of contemporary India has been the decline of the Congress party organisation. The obvious displacement of the Congress from the centre of Indian politics – notwithstanding their electoral success in 2004 - and the Congress' internal organisational entropy is undoubtedly a reflection of political realignment in Indian society. However, it needs to be remembered that politics in India in recent years has become a truly mass affair. The participation of the less affluent citizens in Indian politics no doubt challenged both the Congress and B.J.P. primarily due to their failure to reinvent themselves in accordance with changing social configurations and their articulation in electoral and agitational politics. The B.J.P. has lost support by retreating into its old alliance with the R.S.S. whilst relying excessively on unrealistic propagandist electioneering. The Congress, however, has learnt its lesson in coalition politics in recent years. It has gained few more votes than before, but has entered instead into diverse forms of coalition in order to regain access to political power and preserve its dwindling mass base. It is ironical that Sonia Gandhi's relative inexperience in politics proved to be her greatest asset. Abandoning the highly authoritarian practice of Indira Gandhi, she has relied more upon the collective leadership of seasoned Congress politicians. The Congress party is thus now far more disciplined and cohesive. Sonia Gandhi also readily renounced the formal trappings of power and projected a more neutral and technocratic image of the party by enabling Manmohan Singh to become the new Prime Minister following the 2004 election. The suave, technocratic and supposedly non political image of Manmohan has enabled him to concentrate more on governance. Sonia

meanwhile has been able to concentrate on the management of the party and coalition and has taken upon herself the burden of electoral campaigning. Pragmatic strategising has thus facilitated the emergence of a novel institutional process of coalition building within the ruling party, whilst a more flexible political approach has gained the Congress new acceptance and stemmed the rapid corrosion in its mass base.

A further form of political deinstitutionalisation has been linked, by some observers, with economic liberalisation, privatisation, the absolute decline in state enterprise, and the relative decline in development expenditure. This has resulted in state institutions enjoying a far less prominent place in daily economic life than they did in the first twenty or thirty years after independence. Yet as the same time as political deinstitutionalisation has become apparent in certain areas of the body politic, this volume draws attention to the rise or revitalisation of new forms of political institution. The increasing activism of rural panchayats suggests the growing salience of a novel form of politics at the grass roots level. The much used and frequently abused term (panchayat) has thus gained a fresh lease on life as a political institution since their successful use by the Left Front in West Bengal and the erstwhile Janata Party in Karnataka. |The 74th constitutional amendment concerning local self government institutions has transformed panchayats into an institution of the new mass era in Indian politics, providing both a source of self empowerment for hitherto marginalised groups and a focal point for rural economic and developmental transactions. Indeed, in areas , where such reforms were not implemented, de-institutionalization has become far more apparent and political system has been put into crisis. In recent years in a long corridor extending from the Nepal border in Bihar, down through the adivasi regions of Jharkhand, thickly forested hilly areas of Orissa and Chattisgarh to the dalit and advasi areas of Andhra, revolutionary Maoist movements have raised their head again. In recent state assembly elections in February 2005 voter apathy combined with Maoist violence and police counter terrorist measures contributed to a very low turn out in certain districts of Jharkhand. By contrast, in insurgency devastated Kashmir, people voted in large number in Panchayat elections in January 2005, notwithstanding the reluctance of Kashmir Huryat (an alliance of dissident political parties) to endorse such elections. Institutions at local level can thus provide new means for the mobilisation of popular energies in the transactional politics of development, despite the reluctance of more formal political leadership to become involved.

Urban political institutions cannot be explained in such clear terms, as in both rural market towns and large urban centres the political institutions are more complex. Here we find that the electoral and democratic dynamism of politics is enmeshed with diverse state institutions that tend more often than not to restrict the power of marginalised social groups and force them to confront the far better entrenched institutional power of elites. This is especially true in cities such as Mumbai where the complex arrangement of institutions lies far beyond the reach of the city's slum dwellers or even the middle class working population. The land question in Mumbai is crucially indicative of this powerlessness and the opaqueness of institutions that often enables corruption to thrive and penetrate even the highest echelons of city government.

Political institutions cannot not however, be simply explained in terms of the juxtaposition between popular democratic institutions and bureaucratic entanglements. Bureaucracy has its own institutional dynamism and autonomy that can reshape and influence such crucial areas as popular media. Bureaucratic control can seriously impinge upon popular media which are thereby enmeshed in networks of corporate power, elected political patronages, and commercial and revenue transactions. This is evident in the arena of state level politics as the state often functions as the crucial intermediary layer between an increasingly dysfunctional centre and a dynamic grass roots level of politics. A final crucial political institution in popular state politics is the ill-defined Weberian concept of charisma and its role in garnering popular following. Through an investigation of these various institutions, the present volume presents a montage of the complex arrangements within a variety of Indian political institutions. It is the intention thereby to provide a framework for understanding the changing nature of democracy, governance and civil society in South Asia at a time when the subcontinent is facing both dramatic opportunities and unprecedented threats to its security. The interconnectedness of poverty, alienation, communal and ethnic violence and international conflict are widely apparent. So too are the connections between governance, human, economic and strategic security. We hope that the examples we have addressed might allow a more optimistic perspective on the future developments by illuminating key issues and by demonstrating the innovation and resourcefulness of ordinary Indians in recent years. As democracy has widened, and old structures of authority have diminished, the Indian citizen has clearly a far larger part to play in

the shaping of political institutions than ever before. With improvements in communications and the increasing transparency of public life, the ordinary citizen is also now better equipped to exercise that power. It is be hoped that future political trends will nurture this new found agency and that growing popular participation and governmental accountability within India, will enable Indians to face the challenges of globalisation and to play a more effective and responsible role within the wider world.